

Liz Harman and the ‘Schrödinger’s Baby’ Abortion Argument

A couple of weeks ago, Princeton professor Liz Harman joined James Franco and Eliot Michaelson (whoever that is) [to discuss](#) the morality of early abortion. The essence of her logically incoherent argument is that the morality of abortion depends on whether or not an abortion took place.

More specifically, whether or not an “early fetus” has “moral status” depends on whether or not it has a “future,” although Harman doesn’t go through the trouble of defining how long that “future” must be in order to give the fetus “moral status”: an hour? a month? a year? ten years? If she (the fetus) has no future due to an impending miscarriage, stillbirth, or abortion, then the fetus has no moral status and it would therefore not be immoral to kill her. If she did have a future, whatever that means, then it would be immoral to kill her – unless, of course, she were killed, in which case she had no future, and therefore no moral status.

If this seems like circular reasoning to you, that’s because it is, as Franco and Michaelson acknowledged in their video.

‘Schrödinger’s Baby’

The absurdity of Harman’s argument can be likened to that of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum superpositions, as elucidated through the thought experiment known as [Schrödinger’s Cat](#). According to the Copenhagen interpretation, on the quantum level, atoms or photons exist in multiple states simultaneously but settle into one state upon observation.

To demonstrate how we can know that this is impossible,

Austrian physicist Erwin Schrödinger proposed that we imagine a steel box containing a radioactive atom and a Geiger counter, into which we have locked a living cat. The box also contains a vial of poison which will be broken, killing the cat, once the atom decays. If the atom is simultaneously both decayed and not-decayed, then the cat must be simultaneously dead and alive. It is only upon opening the box and observing the cat that one of the two possibilities “sticks” and presents itself to us as either a living cat or a dead one.

My friend, [Nathan Carpenter](#), who pointed out the similarity between this thought experiment and Harman’s reasoning, proposed his own: “Schrödinger’s Baby.” According to Harman, an unborn baby is simultaneously both a person of moral status and a non-person of no moral status, and it is only upon observing whether or not she gets to be born, or have whatever length of a future that Harman decides is necessary, that her status becomes settled.

According to this “logic,” only non-persons have their lives cut short, whether through natural means or unnatural ones.

Because murder extinguishes a person’s future, he must not have had moral status, at least not in the eyes of the person who took his life. The murder was therefore not immoral, and murder itself is merely a social construct. If we continue further down this rabbit hole, we find that no person has moral status except that which is granted to him by those who are more powerful than he is.

'Will to Power' and 'Might Makes Right'

At its core, this argument for abortion is no different than all other arguments for abortion. All arguments for abortion, no matter how they are clothed, are based on a Nietzschean "will to power," which philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre discusses in his book *After Virtue*:

"The underlying structure of his argument is as follows: if there is nothing to morality but expressions of will, my morality can only be what my will creates. There can be no place for such fictions as natural rights, utility, the greatest happiness of the greatest number. I myself must now bring into existence 'new tables of what is good'" (132).

It should be evident that at the heart of Harman's argument is the assumption that the mother's will determines the moral status of her child. She is merely attempting to use philosophical chicanery to disguise the true nature of her position. It is much more palatable to adopt a worldview in which morality is contingent on our own will (an indirect and less-obviously hubristic way of saying that we're gods) than to openly admit that we believe that we possess the divine power to determine another, weaker person's moral status and

worth.

The argument for abortion based on “bodily autonomy” is no less another manifestation of the notions of “will to power” and “might makes right.” At its center, it denies the existence of the second body – that of the unborn child – and its own right to autonomy. Those who use it have deemed that the mother’s bodily autonomy trumps that of the child. Why?

Because, as many pro-aborts have admitted, “My life is worth more.” And why is that? If they were honest, they would say, “Because I can say so, and my unborn child cannot.”

The argument based on personhood is no less Machiavellian.

Who is able to determine who is a person and who isn’t?

Historically, it has always been those who were more powerful who have presumed to possess the ability to make such a distinction among human beings. The unborn are the weakest, most vulnerable among us, and pro-“choicers” have determined that the unborn aren’t “persons” simply because they can, and because it allows them to dispose of other people who “get in the way” of pursuing their own interests.

All arguments for abortion rest on the principles of bodily autonomy (of only the mother, of course) and the lack of personhood of the unborn child. And these principles are supported by the underlying assumption that “might makes right.” It is, truthfully, the only argument for abortion, but if you accept that, then you must accept that might ALWAYS makes right, not just when you’re the mighty. Rape, murder, domestic violence, child abuse, animal abuse, wars of aggression, genocide, the despoliation of the natural world – all are permissible under the moral framework of the pro-choice person.

Surely they protest such things, and they’ve dressed up their arguments for abortion to hide the logical inconsistencies of their own moral code. They want to have their cake and eat it: they want a moral basis on which to defend their own

rights and the rights of other people or organisms that they've deemed worthy while having their unborn child dismembered and sucked out of their womb with a vacuum.

As Devin Foley [explains](#) at *Intellectual Takeout*, there is no logical basis on which we can be "outraged" when we've abandoned objective morality. He writes:

The problem is that our society is rooted in the fumes of a Christian-Hellenist ethic that shaped the West for 2,000 years. We want the fruit of that tree, but we chopped the tree down. We must be honest with ourselves that having discarded the tree, we are only left with Nietzsche's will to power. As such, the good fruit we enjoy today will soon rot if we do not rediscover a moral framework other than feelings.

The problem with Harman's "philosophy," as with Schrödinger's Cat, is that there is, actually, an objective reality. A cat cannot be simultaneously both dead and alive. Human beings, at whatever stage of development on the human life cycle they may be from zygote to senescence, cannot be simultaneously both persons and non-persons. They cannot have both moral status and no moral status at the same time.

There is objective morality, and it's what all people turn to and rely on whenever their own rights are under attack. There can be no rights for anyone if some of us can determine that others lack those rights based on the power we possess to enforce our point of view.

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